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ABSTRACT

Dramatic increases in the dropout rate, particularly among classified behavior disordered children, coupled with a decline in an Occupational Education enrollment project led to the creation of a "failure identity" for individuals and a loss of human resources to the national work force. The need to address this problem was the stimulus for creating the Technical Alternative High School. It was designed to treat an aspect of the dropout problem by offering students a realistic opportunity to experience competence through occupational training integrated with academics and supported by structured counseling activities. The goal of the program was to address the attitudes and behaviors that contribute to the dropout problem by developing a student's sense of competence and worth through meaningful vocational and academic experiences, integrated with social skills training and counseling support. Post-test results thus far have been encouraging and have helped to achieve the award of a competitive grant for dropout prevention. Students demonstrated improvements in the levels of on-task behavior achieved in problems with learning, unhappiness/depression, and physical symptoms/fears. The Special Education staff came to be looked upon as a resource to the larger community for assistance and advice with other problematic students on campus who were neither classified nor enrolled in the Technical Alternative High School. (Author/ABL)

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(Paper presented at the National Dropout Prevention Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, March, 1990)

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Abstract

Dramatic increases in the drop-out rate, particularly among classified behavior disordered children, coupled with a decline in Occupational Education enrollment project to the creation of a "failure identity" for individuals and a loss of human resources to the national work force. The need to address this problem was the stimulus for creating the Technical Alternative High School. It was designed to treat an aspect of the drop-out problem by offering students a realistic opportunity to experience competence through occupational training integrated with academics and supported by structured counseling activities. Post-test results thus far have been encouraging and have helped to achieve the award of a competitive grant for drop-out prevention.

INTRODUCTION:

In Westchester County, N.Y., there has been an obvious and dramatic increase in the overall student drop-out rate. More disturbing has been a disproportionate increase in the drop-out rate among classified/or emotionally handicapped children. This coupled with the fact that there is also an increase in the number of students being classified has produced an alarming situation. At the same time, there has been a decrease in the number of students taking Occupational Education, as well as a corresponding decrease in trained workers available to join the work force in the 1990's (McDill, Natriello & Pallas, 1986). Therefore, in order to better serve the needs of these students, and to ameliorate the larger work force shortage, the Technical Alternative High School (TAHS) was established in September 1984. In July 1989, the U.S. Department of Education recognized this program as one of the "Top 10" in this country for drop-out prevention by designating it as a demonstration program and awarding a grant to support expansion and dissemination activities.

RATIONALE:

In 1951, Lewin proposed that Learning is a function of Person by Environment interaction (L=f (PxE)). However, it has long been recognized (Glaser, 1977) that not all learners' needs can be appropriately addressed within traditional academic high school environments. A variety of person factors from cognitive to physiological to social-emotional can have an influential effect on the learning outcome. Nevertheless, three variables have been consistently identified (Nave, 1990) as being significantly correlated to the achievement of success in school: 1) positive personal relationship with the teacher; 2) student's level of self-esteem; and, 3) level of mother's education. The first two of these variables are accessible to intervention and can be used to effect positive changes in learning outcomes. Perhaps most critical is self-esteem and the poorer self-concept that accompanies it for at-risk students.

The TAHS was created with the assumption that potential enrollees would be: a) identified as inappropriate for traditional high school due to individual learner differences; and b) experiencing a negative reaction due to feelings of not fitting into that environment. The program's task was therefore viewed in the reverse order of these two characteristics: 1) to address the negative feelings and self-concept damage which accompanies the perception of not "fitting-in"; and, 2) to provide meaningful training experiences to challenge otherwise untapped or frustrated learner differences.

The idea of using Occupational Education for "turned-off" students is not at all novel (Hahn, Danzberger & Lefkowitz, 1987; Hayward, Adelman & Apling, 1988). Educators have intuitively felt that many of these students required a more hands-on or experiential approach to learning for both good and bad reasons. In some cases, making all students "fit into the mold" despite individual learner differences has produced frustration not only for the student but the school personnel, as well. In the worst of these cases, this frustration has led to an "out, out, damned spot" reaction whereby the student is viewed as wrong for not fitting and blamed for it. Occupational training in this perspective becomes the penal colony to which the offending student can be sent. Ironically, for some students who fell out of the traditional

design, the move might otherwise be right, but for the wrong reasons. Consequentially, the "damned spot" reasons for an Occ. Ed. placement can, in fact, undermine and contaminate the potential remedial effect. If a student is caused to infer that (s)he was kicked out of the "preferred" academic track and placed in the Occ. Ed. track, how motivated can (s)he be expected to be?!

On the other hand, there are good reasons for Occ. Ed. placements. The good reason or the educated guess behind the Occ. Ed. choice for at-risk students has been the realization that not all learners learn in the same modalities, and that some are more sensorially oriented, tactile, or visual-spatial. Indeed, the recent work of Farley (1989) suggests that the rationale for non-traditional training approaches may have a more physiological or temperamental basis. Research into the "Type T Personality" patterns substantiates the long-held belief that some of us differ from one another because our neurochemistry and "internal clocks" have essentially different tempos. The theory maintains that not only are the temperaments different but more critically, so are the threshold for sensory stimulation/ excitation. This perspective has helped to clarify the mission statement of the TAHS.

It provides the basis for appreciating that not all at-risk students' needs for alternative learning environments are identical (NAVESNP, Definitions & Recommendations for the Disadvantaged). While the literature today is replete with references to at-risk youth, "behaviorally dysfunctional students" and "alternative programs", it is necessary to define what these terms mean here. This program should therefore be viewed as a special approach to one kind of at-risk student; the student who is classified as behaviorally disordered or emotionally disturbed. However, as most educators working with drop-out prevention will agree, it would take more than the resurrection of Thomas Dewey and Sigmund Freud to figure out the difference between youth at-risk and behaviorally disordered students! As these problems confront the school and as schools are delimited to respond, there may appear to be no meaningful, bottom-line difference.

Students who are cutting, cutting-up, truant, vandalizing, aggressive, anti-social and generally turned off to school are at risk of dropping out whether or not they are indeed classified. By the way that our society defines success and success in school, it is dysfunctional to drop out. While the challenge of keeping many of these students in school remains similar, particularly when the maladaptive behaviors which lead to dropping out are looked at, the TAHS approach views the basic problem for its sample of at-risk youth as one of competence and identity. When a student's basic aptitudes and temperament needs are not addressed and/or frustrated, turned off behaviors can occur. The failure cycle begins to take shape as the student chooses to remove oneself from the arena of achievement and competence and the "failure identity" (Glasser, 1965, 1969) emerges.

One approach to treating the drop-out problem would be to adapt the anti-drug slogan "Just Say No!" and simply reinforce the attitude "Just Say Yes!" (to school). While not disparaging the intent of that approach, it would nevertheless seem to be inadequate to solving the drop-out problem. Still, the public schools' posture is somewhat tenuous in so far as it faces what may be characterized for these students as a developmental adjustment crisis of identity (Erickson, 1950) armed only with its educational mission statement. The question then becomes one of the

how to develop a deeper understanding of a societal problem of which dropping out is only a symptom and yet provide intervention which conforms to the mandate of public schools?

The TAHS intervention design had to confront this question. A deliberate attempt was made to define the drop-out phenomena neither in the narrow terms of bottom-line attrition rates nor as causalities of broader societal dynamics, but to map out a middle road. This approach focuses primarily upon the student as a learner in the generic sense and stresses the school's role as educational as opposed to social service or mental health care. Simply stated , then the role defined for the TAHS in drop-out prevention was "to teach": teach competence and thereby enable identity building behavior through occupational training. The underlying assumption here is that changing learner outcomes involves not only changes in the person but facilitative changes in the learning environment, as well (Bishop, 1988).

Dropping-out is viewed as a culminating dysfunctional behavioral choice which was probably preceded by other avoidance behavior and choices. The Key to the TAHS methodology is the assumption that the behavior of dropping out cannot be addressed per se because it is a singular event. Instead, the program design assumes that there are incremental off-task behaviors which the student chooses that lead up to and thereby produce the end-choice of dropping-out. It is therefore those off-task behaviors which become the focus of intervention in the TAHS approach.

Throughout, the student is considered to be a person striving, as all humans do, to become competent and building an identity accordingly. The student, whose individual learner differences are not appropriately engaged, becomes frustrated, turned off, moves off-task, evidences behavioral disorders, receives negative feedback, experiences incompetence, creates a lower self-concept and eventually becomes a high risk of running away by dropping-out. The school's role therefore is to use education to "break this cycle" (N.D.P.C., 1990).

METHOD: Comprehensive programming involves three components: Occupational Education, Academics and Counseling Support.

1) Occupational Education: If dysfunctional behavior and a failure identity can be shown to be learned, then on-task behavior and a success identity can also be taught. The key to this kind of teaching is more appropriately engaging the individual learner differences by creating meaningful opportunities to experience competence. This rationale views Occupational Education as more than just a "damned spot" or geographic solution for problematic behavior. It is the fulcrum with which the student's doors of perception are wedged open and the motivation to achieve is reengaged. In the perspective of Hunter's instructional model (Russell & Hunter, 1977), this use of Occ. Ed. is directly analogous to the "Anticipatory Set". The student's motivation and interest are not only addressed but given a directional impetus toward the theme of the larger lesson: learning on-task behavior, competence and the success identity. "Instructional Input" for the lesson goes beyond the obvious technologies of the vocational trades and includes academic and counseling support. However, these components are aligned with the occupational piece which becomes the cornerstone for TAHS students. Wherever possible and relevant, academics are related to the trade area and used both to support training and capitalize upon the student's increased motivational interest. For example, the capacity exists to take an otherwise "boring" course in

mathematics and make it relevant to Electrical Trades, thereby increasing both the chances of the student succeeding in that vocation and passing math.

The Occ. Ed. courses available to all students are structured into two levels: Basic and Secondary. This enables more adaptive programming for students whose personal-social needs require more developmental remediation. The Basic Occ. Ed. course is specifically designed, in fact, to address the "Employability Skills" of the student through a structured exposure to vocational activities. In this novel approach to training, the transferable aspects of on-the-job survival are given primary focus, while the actual trade skills are viewed as enabling activities. Students in the Basic program rotate through a variety of exploratory experiences while pursuing the core attitude and behavior objectives. Readiness for further training and specialization is determined upon a review of progress in "Employability Skills" and the assessment of vocational aptitude.

2) Academics: The purpose of the TAHS comprehensive programming design is to enable the impetus generated by Occ. Ed. involvement to be extended and reinforced further through the academic and personal-social components. While comprehensive schools have existed for decades, an active attempt is made here to relate the three components to the presenting learner style differences, and deficits. It is felt that more than these three "bricks" in scheduling are needed, but that a viable "mortar" is also important. The cohesive link is the emphasis upon building an on-task attitude and a success identity. Personal development and counseling become integral to achieving these goals. It critically involves a specific and structured training module, The Social Skills Curriculum (Bryne, Frommer, Hughes & Jambor, 1985), which is presented in group counseling and integrated throughout the academic programming. In the Occ. Ed. half of the day, students participate in "Employability Skills" Training in their vocational classes. These activities are viewed as concomittant to on the job success as are the actual trade skills acquired.

The personal-social theme that cements the bricks of the program is particularly important to supporting the success of the academic component. As noted earlier, these students' at-risk behaviors can be traced in large part to an aversion, frustration or inability to handle the academic requirements of a high school diploma. Yet, the TAHS is built on the premise that its students can and will be enabled to achieve that goal. To do so then requires not only the incentive provided through Occ. Ed., and the personal-social support component, but a fully departmentalized and adaptive academic environment. Despite the fact that the TAHS is located entirely on an Occ. Ed. campus, a full range of high school curricula is available. In addition, realistic mainstreaming opportunities have been created whereby these special education students can participate in both academic and Occ. Ed. classes, where appropriate, together with their non-classified peers. This was a significant achievement which helped to distinguish the TAHS design from previous special education programs. Heretofore, E.H. students were segregated and/or given the kind of programming that could cause them to feel "wierd", rejected and different. The creative use of comprehensive programming at TAHS was intentionally designed to counteract those feelings and thereby be more conducive to building a healthy success identity.

3) Counseling Support: : The psychologists assigned to the TAHS have responsibility for articulating, implementing and evaluating the personal-social support component. Insofar as this element is integral to creating the "therapeutic milieu" of the program, it includes several activities. To assure that the TAHS meets its goal of being a student-driven-system, needs assessment becomes the first and last of these activities. Students' behaviorial evaluations are completed within 30 days of placement and base line data are used to define points of-entry into the Social Skills Curriculm and Employability Skills continuum. Counseling goals are identified which will: 1) address the students' behaviors in regularly scheduled individual and group sessions; and, 2) provide an overall plan for Social Skills acquisition throughout the entire program.

The intervention model which is called "the Counseling Act" (Jambor, 1989) is designed to be a structured, generic approach to counseling that enables the psychologist to be both reponsive to student needs and compliant to the N.Y. State Education Department guidelines for "Counseling as a Related Service" (NYSED, 1980). This model attempts to articulate and support the "Counseling Act" for the psychologist in an analogous way to which the "The Teaching Act" is used for teachers.

An important part of implementing intervention in the "staff-as-a-team" concept is the coordination of case conferences for in-service training. These activities are also the psychologists' responsibility. The evaluation component of this design requires formal post-testing in May and an analysis of behavioral outcomes. This systematic screening, programming and evaluation methodology formed the rationale for the Demonstration Program Grant for Drop-Out Prevention. It also will be submitted to the N.Y. State Office of Program Validation this summer together with the 1989-90 post-test results.

PROGRAM GOAL:

"To address the attitudes and behaviors that contribute to the Drop-Out Problem by devloping a student's sense of competence/worth through meaningful vocational & academic experiences, integrated with Social Skills Training and counseling support."

OBJECTIVES:

- early identification of potential drop-outs through systematic screening of base-line attitudes and behaviors associated with the problem
- adaptive vocational and academic programming, matched to students' needs and aptitudes
- development of a fully differentiated range of support services, coordinated through an Individual Counseling Plan.

RESULTS:

The methodolgy of the TAHS will have been subjected to two stages of evaluation: pilot and full-study. In 1988-89, data were gathered, analyzed and presented from a pilot-study in support of a Federal Demonstration Program Grant for Drop-Out Prevention (U.S. Department of Adult and Vocational Education). In the present 1989-90 school year, the project is being expanded to include a pre-post test, matched-pairs design (using MANOVA analysis). Students from the TAHS are being compared to similar students in a Special Education program that do <u>not</u> have an Occ. Ed. component. Behaviors that are identified as "at-risk" and therefore precipitous to dropping-out are being tracked for both groups, using The Behavior Evaluation Scale (McCarney, Leigh and Cornbleet, 1983). These behaviors correspond to the five critical categories identified by PL #94-142 in the definiton of emotional disturbance, and include: 1) Problems with Learning (PL); 2) Interpersonal Difficulties (IP); 3) Inappropriate Behavior (IB); 4) Unhappiness/Depression (UN); 5) Physical Symptoms/Fears (PH). These behaviors have also been shown (Hennessy and Jambor, 1988) to be critical determinants with programming for at-risk students.

In the pilot test, students were pre-tested in September and post-tested in May, thus allowing eight months for the effects of intervention. Only those students who had complete sets of pre- post-test data were included in the analysis

of results. The issue of student attrition is particularly relevant and problematic to a study such as this. The emphasis upon behavior factors over drop-out rate however allowed for a more qualitative review. Due to insufficient comparison group sample size, a rational analysis was employed instead. In terms of the mean level of Behavior Evaluations, the TAHS sample showed greater improvement than the non-Occ. Ed. sample. The improvement was most evident in the off-task category of Unhappiness/Depression (UN) and Physical Systoms/Fears (PH). When the TAHS sample was used as its own baseline, the results corroborated this finding. There were significant improvements in the levels of on-task behavior achieved in three of the five categories being tracked which were exactly those identified as most critical to the selection of TAHS students (LP, UN, Ph).

In additon to the outcomes noted in the area of student development, there was evidence of formative progress gained with staff development, as well. The methodology of systematic screening, programming and evaluation created a a situation analogous to Cornelius Vanderbilt's systemization of the railroads in the United States. The individual styles and training backgrounds of staff members were given a common perspective, understanding of the student and perhaps, most important, language for communicating about the task. With the staff alignment of resources produced by this integrated approach to the problem of dropping-out, a greater concentration and economy of effort was achieved. Less time was spent in team meetings on "re-inventing the wheel", debating terminology, psychology and treatment strategies. More time was spent de-briefing the actual cases and attending to more programmatic issues. With the increased cohesiveness among the Special Education academic staff, the challenge of coordinating with the Occ. Ed. staff and environment became more focused. In fact, the Special Education staff came to be looked upon as a resource to the larger community for assistance and advice with other problematic students on campus who were neither classisfied nor enrolled in the TAHS. This final point underscored the assumption made earlier concerning the sometimes barely neglible differences between at-risk and behaviorally disordered students' needs.

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